

Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist

November 20, 2011

Praise Song

Call to Worship - Praise Song for the Day - Elizabeth Alexander

Each day we go about our business,
walking past each other,
catching each other's eyes or not,
about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise.
All about us is noise and bramble, thorn and din,
each one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem,
darning a hole in a uniform,
patching a tire,
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.
A farmer considers the changing sky.
A teacher says, *Take out your pencils. Begin.*

We encounter each other in words,
words spiny or smooth,
whispered or declaimed,
words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways
that mark the will of some one and then others,
who said I need to see what's on the other side.
I know there's something better down the road.

We need to find a place where we are safe.
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks,
raised the bridges,
picked the cotton and the lettuce,
built brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle,
praise song for the day.

Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,
others by *first do no harm or*
take no more than you need.

What if the mightiest word is love?
Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle,
this winter air, any thing can be made,
any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,
praise song for walking forward in that light.

Reading - "All this Beauty" By Rebecca Parker

Moses was out doing his job one day, minding his own business in the pasture, keeping watch over the flocks by day when he saw the bush on fire!

You've seen it.

I saw it one morning as I watched the dawn alight skim the tops of the cedars, transfusing the mists over the silver water. You've seen it in the face of a newborn child or your lover's eyes in a moment of intimacy. You've seen it in the rain forest or the high ridges of the Smokey Mountains.

You've seen it in the middle of a church service when people were singing, or felt it in the silence. It has whispered to you in a tender voice. It has held you and stopped you in your tracks.

And you too, have asked, "What do we do with all this beauty?"

When Moses saw it, the voice from the bush said, "you must go back to Egypt where I have seen my people in their travail. You must lead them to freedom."

Moses, of course, said what anyone would: "Ask someone else to do this!"

But the voice was insistent. "No, you must go. You must offer this leadership."

And Moses wrangled with God and said, "Look, my brother Aaron would be much better, okay? The Quakers would be much better. The progressive Catholics would be much better. The reconstructionist Jews, they could do this!"

The voice was insistent. "No. You must go. You must do this."

Beauty confronts us with the requirement that we place ourselves among the saviors, the redeemers, the leaders in the protection of life. Once you have seen the bush on fire, you are not going to get out of the assignment unless you close your eyes to the beauty.

But if you have seen, if you have taken off your shoes, tasted the blackberries, and felt the tenderness of love, if you have seen how the full force of soul is in each child that comes into this world, you either have to close your eyes or go back to Egypt and set the people free.

The blessing of life is that it will not let us go until we ourselves have offered the blessing we have to give. As Rumi said, "Let the beauty we love be what we do."

Sermon – "Praise Song" by Gretchen Haley

An African Praise Song starts with the name of the thing or person the Song wants to honor and celebrate.

And so I start this, *our* Praise song by saying -

Worship.

The second line, goes deeper, tries to name the thing more fully, or describe a particular an aspect of it....

The Old English comes as *Worth-scipe* – Embodying things Worthy, Holding things of Worth

...And then another line comes, offering yet another aspect of truth about the object of the Praise Song...

Sunday mornings, we gather together as a community to name and explore what we hold worthy.

...And the lines of the Praise Song keep coming, in this poetic form, with a certain rhythm and cadence, 5 to 12 lines usually, but sometimes it can go on and on, lasting until the thing has been adequately named, and praised, and adorned...

Unitarian Universalists worship like the African Praise Song, digging in together to the deepest places, delving in, never quite satisfied we've yet approached Ultimate Truth, never prepared to declare we've praised what Matters Most of All, given voice to *all* that is worthy of praise, given thanks for *all* the unbearable goodness of it *all*.

Like many versions of the African Praise Song, this one is a call and response.

Before you get too nervous, let me help you imagine what that means by giving an example of call and response. It's from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Baby Suggs is leading worship, and she starts like this: "Let the children come!" she calls out.

"And the children who've followed her, run toward her.

'Let your mothers hear you laugh,' she tells them, and the woods ring.

And then she invites the men, and says 'Let your wives and your children see you dance,'

And groundlife shudders under their feet.

Finally, she calls the women to her, 'Cry,...for the living and the dead. Just cry.'

And without covering their eyes, the women let loose."

"Their worship time started that way," Toni Morrison tells us:

"laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then" - like all good worship - "it got all mixed up.

"Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath."

So though I said we worship like the African Praise Song, this call and response part, it's a little scary for us, I know.

But, I've seen its spark here, among us. I've seen you, moved, like you could call out. Like you could raise your hands. I've seen tears flowing, and not just from those of us who shed tears as easily as we breathe. I've heard you begin to give yourself over to laughter and *mm-hmms* and nods.

This Praise Song we're making right here, today – it's an invitation to give ourselves over to these sparks.

I'll call, you respond – with Rebecca Parker's question: *What will we do with all this beauty?*

Say it the way that comes to you, a part, or whole – What will we do – with all this beauty?

Say it, or sing it, dance it even.

Say it when you *must* say it. When something I say, or something in the air, when something *moves* you, reminds you that you too have seen the bush on fire and you can't not say:

What will we do – with all this beauty?

Whenever you *must* say it, that's your cue.

And when you give it voice, know it'll be met by others.

Meet others as they call out. Greet each other in your brave response.

Don't be scared.

Are we ready? Here we go.

Worship.

A while back, I was a part of a Unitarian Universalist Worship Committee where we spent a lot of time arguing about whether or not what we did on a Sunday morning was worship.

Worship implies a deity, one of our committee members insisted, *worship means one above all, and I don't believe in any of that anymore.*

And though I knew what he meant, I thought to myself,
How many miracles have you witnessed today? Too many to count.

How many places where there may have been nothing, is there something, and is that something beautiful, joyous, beyond measure?

How much is worthy of praise, and whatever could we do to earn such a possibility as this one life, and how many shouts of joy and thanks could we offer and still not express sufficient gratitude?

I thought, we should worship *more*, not less.

Glory be: Friendships renewed! Praise be: Bodies renewed; Sing out for: New Homes and remodeling plans; Let us give thanks for: Wedding proposals and positive pregnancy tests; Let us worship: Growing life inside us all, good news of life's re-creation, this new day...

And the gathered people say: *What will we do with all this beauty?*

Worship.

Praise, give thanks.

On Sunday morning, on every morning (if we're lucky and willing)

Praise beauty as it flourishes.

There are other words Unitarian Universalists use to describe what they're up to on a Sunday morning – we say: services, meetings, gatherings – these words are all good. But there's something about the word – *Worship* – that gets to more what I hope we're up to, what I hope we are experiencing when we meet and gather together.

Worship – it's not a time just for our brains (though bring those too) – that's what "meeting" says to me, brain time. And it's not a time that's for work exactly – that's what "service" says to me (though there is some heavy lifting).

Worship is a bigger word with bigger implications.

It says, not only does this time matter, but matters in the biggest way.

It's not just a gathering about *anything*, about whatever curious thing we've decided to talk about on any given day.

It's what we care *most* about. What we want our lives *most* to be about.

Worship says, there'll be singing, and there'll be silence, there'll be candles and there'll be prayers.

And, worship says there'll be *preaching* – not lectures or talks or even reflections – these are all words we use sometimes - but what I hope you *expect* when you come to *Worship* on Sundays, is *preaching* –

Preaching - rooted in a specific religious tradition, boldly proclaiming a particular religious vision.

Preaching that seeks to comfort, and seeks to challenge, to let loose and to form.

Preaching that holds out before the gathered people, not just who we are now, but who we are called to become, both as individuals and as a religious community.

Preaching is vigorous, and often passionate, and it has everything to do with that thing we've been trying to get at this month – what matters Ultimately.

Which means that when the preaching is flowing – it's coming from my deepest sense of self – *and* from someplace that has absolutely nothing to do with me.

And so, in our *worship* time, especially in the preaching time, I show up, all the way, with my whole heart, and also, I get out of the way, and welcome, Spirit.

Worship invites us *all* to show up that way - with our whole, most authentic selves, *and* invite in something beyond ourselves, bravely seeking wholeness in a too-often broken world.

Worship says you'll find here real people carrying their biggest dreams and biggest fears, their tears and their laughter, their darkest secrets and their deepest yearnings.

Worship says – like Baby Suggs in her clearing – we might dance, we might sway our arms in the air, we might call out - --- (())

We might do whatever we need to do to name and praise the surprising work of love in this world, the bright glory of life that just keeps on coming, lift our heads and our hearts and let them open to **All this Beauty**, offering itself to us as possibility, again, again, again.

In the silence that followed her calling out in the Clearing, the preacher, Baby Suggs, offered up to all her people, her great big heart.

“Here,’ she said, ‘in this here place, we all flesh. Love it. Love it hard.’

And then saying no more, she stood up, and danced the rest of what her heart had to say, while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music.”

Love it, her body said. Love it, the music said. Love it hard.

It's one answer to that question - what's the question:

What will we do with all this beauty?

Praise it, adore it, worship it. Love it hard.

Of course, loving all this beauty so hard, it knocks us over just as often as it lifts us up.

We fall to our knees, once we *know* in our flesh what is worthy of praise.

Loving that hard, it's impossible to prevent – we notice, we pay attention -

And we see, all the infinite places where beauty *is missing*
All the ways life *does not fulfill its promise*
All the places of *brokenness and loss*
Even inside ourselves –

It's another kind of worship – after praise – another way of naming what is most worthy
The flip side of praise, it's called *lament*

Did you hear about the little girl in eastern Illinois? 10 years old, she took her own life last week, after being bullied for looking like a boy, for just too long.¹

In my worship time, I need to remember that little girl.

¹ http://www.advocate.com/News/Daily_News/2011/11/15/Girl_Takes_Life_After_Gender_Based-Taunting/

I need to be able say: I want her back, that little girl. I want her back.

I don't know what she looked like. I don't know if she looked "like a boy."

But in our worship time, we must cry out to the sky, pleading for a world where it does not matter.

Please, I want a world where she can live no matter what her heart calls her to look like.

I want a world where she believes this world is a place she'd want to live. A world that has that much beauty.

She deserves that much beauty. I want my kids to have a world with that much beauty. I want us all to have a world with that much beauty.

I want to tear my clothes until my heart shows, bare. I want to smear ashes on my face, and call out - *Why? And no. And help.*

I want to join with my community, as we recite together those words I shared last time from the prophet Habbakuk: "How long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. Justice never prevails."

I want to turn to my community of faith as we exclaim: ***What ever will we do – with all this beauty?***

Worship – not as praise, but as lament.

Lament- a word that means so much more than protest, though that starts to get at it

Lament is a protest that is beyond hope for change, it's protesting with the same fervor that the praising came, in the same way that you can't possibly do it enough -

Mourn: Families separated across made-up borders;

Curse: Moms who can't remember our names for the disease that's taken their brain hostage;

Cry against: Daughters watching their fathers arrested, and taken away;

Rage at: Human arrogance covering up years of abuse; Grieve: Closed off hearts kept unavailable after too much wounding;

Lament: my friend had another interview, but still no job in sight

How is it we can be so lost? We cry out together to the Universe in this part of our Song

Say it plain, as Elizabeth Alexander says

We can do better, we are meant for better

Worshipping in protests, our voices are a chorus:

We've seen the bush on fire, we've seen the beauty, we know how much love there is, and how can we do anything but call back to Egypt, let all the people free, let all the people free.

What will we do? Do I hear you asking: **What will we do?**

Rebecca Parker is referencing James Baldwin when she asks the question we've been reciting.

It's from his essay, "The Fire Next Time," which as she says, is "a keen and painful exposition of the depth of loss and grief people of African descent experience in North American culture.

But then, at the end of the essay, Baldwin invokes the resilience of spirit, the freshness of new life embodied in children growing up in community and he says,

'The question remains: **What will we do with all this beauty?'**²

After the praising, and the lamenting, the question still presents itself to us – the worship still goes on.

Calling out with shouts of joy and grief, we worship so hard, love the world so hard, until we're a part of it, a part-ner with the beauty,

a part-ner with all the people who will join us in song,

a part-ner with all the energy we have amongst us,

a part-ner with the Universe in its ongoing creation.

"God is work to be done in the world," remember?

It's what I hope for too – the third and final way I want to offer as an answer to the question you keep asking-

What will we do with all this beauty? Be a part of it. Partner with it. Make more beauty. Close the gap between Praise and Lament.

So that worship doesn't end when you leave here. So that our whole lives become acts of worship.

Lots of people volunteer, lots of people give their time and their talent, lots of people are justice-makers, lots of people are social change agents, lots of people – Unitarian Universalist and otherwise – desire to partner with Life to bring more beauty.

But when I say Partner, I'm still talking about worship. And partnering with the universe as an act of *worship* is something different, something more.

It means singing becomes a reasonable response in a soup kitchen.

It means every meal is a potential communion.

It means there is no division between "social justice people," and "spiritual people" – it's all worship, and it's all the ways we can't not respond to all this beauty.

Getting up early and making the coffee before your partner wakes.

Holding the door for a stranger with her hands full.

² From "What Shall We Do With All this Beauty?" by Rebecca Parker in *Bless the World: What Can Save Us Now*, pg 123.

Getting to know the social change agencies in our community, and building real relationship with them, asking what they need.

Deciding to forgo something you love so you can give a little more – of your time, your money- to your community of *faith*.

Bearing witness to suffering, no matter its cause, for the long haul.

Loving the world for what it actually is, praising the good, lamenting the lack

It's all, partnering for more beauty – paying attention, and responding in whatever way we can and making more of *all this beauty*. It's all worship.

What will we do with all this beauty?

Worship.

Praise, Lament, Partner

Loving the world, this hard - Loving the world into Be-ing, it is not for the faint of heart.

It takes so much courage to keep on with this worshipful life

So we gather to strengthen ourselves, and each other

We gather to sing, risking the fullness of our cracking voices, heard by those around us as not yet perfect

We gather and try out shouting into the silence, unsure and unsteady –

We practice being seen for all our imperfections

It's dangerous and worthy

We gather to sing and sway, moan and wail, call out and listen in, opening our hearts, letting ourselves see

It's risky, and so worthy -

For there is wisdom in our gathering – where two or more of us are gathered, *Ubi Caritas*

Wisdom is there, we each hold a piece of the truth

And we need each other to keep ourselves unfolding, keep this world unfolding

The Hebrew prophet Micah says our Praise Song's refrain like this:

With what shall I come before this Life, and with what shall I yield to this most Glorious Universe?

And in response, this mysterious Life says to back to the prophet:

O sweet human, what does the Big Everything require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly guided by the Greatest Love?

What does your growing God ask of you, sweet humans?

What will you do with all this beauty?

Praise its Presence, Lament its absence, and Partner for its Limitless Possibilities.

For all this beauty, let us go on, always, in worship.